

softer than shadow and quicker than flies

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softer than shadow and quicker than flies

by [TheEternal \(TheEternal_1\)](#).

Summary

The numbness itches by the absence of sensation, a negative space devolving into needles pressing along his arms, feet, face. Stiff, rigid, rotten wood flaking snow instead of his pair of legs, it's a miracle that looking down he has not found his body half-turned into a tree, some kind of metamorphosis given to him by the kindness of the very earth who had wished to swallow him mere moments ago.

Notes

1. Thank you so much [Griffin](#) for listening to my ramblings the past days + beta reading!
2. The title is from Lullaby - The Cure

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The danger is that I am well out of my depth in this gutterless downpour.

— Felicity Plunkett, *Cyclone Plotting* from 'A Kinder Sea'

The phone falls out of his hands.

It's no wonder, since he can barely feel his fingertips. The numbness itches by the absence of sensation, a negative space devolving into needles pressing along his arms, feet, face. Stiff, rigid, rotten wood flaking snow instead of his pair of legs, it's a miracle that looking down he has not found his body half-turned into a tree, some kind of metamorphosis given to him by the kindness of the very earth who had wished to swallow him mere moments ago. The sea of whining dogs parts as he struggles to take his snow-drenched clothes off, only earning him a grunt, and a bark in response. He can't, the pain reaches him before the stilted jerk, joints balling into electricity. A passive exhaustion blankets him, and the knowledge that if he were to bend to and pick the device with a now cracked screen between his feet he'd collapse washes all intent to brave this mistake on his own. Out of the corner of his eye, the rich blue walls of his home are peeling, leaving muscle exposed.

Will blinks, and contains the spill of his raw nerves. Something's got to give. Something's got to break. Perhaps he already did. Then he might as well try to glue it, stitch it, all back together, right? At least for tonight.

But Will is completely unaware of how to proceed, how to regain feeling, how to stop the rattling shivers, the cold that's climbing up his spine even steps away from his vivacious fireplace. Its embers rage and he realizes he doesn't remember starting the fire. Mind flayed, ribbons of white and grey tissue. He'd been getting into his car one moment, armpit deep in the snow the next. At least 2 hours gone if not more, the drive home from Quantico he'd completely blocked out, erased forever from his faulty memory —if it had been etched in it in the first place. Life was slipping under him, pooling around his feet like the sweat caking his sheets in the night. He focused on the angry red of his bloated fingers, bent them with difficulty, and started the engine of his body again.

Each movement a stab, each step threatening to be the last before he keels over, taking any chance of help down with him into the pit. A newfound rawness burns in his lungs, as if he'd tossed a coal down his throat and the smoke swirled around his skull. Will blinks away the tears, wishing that for once in his life, simple things were not the hardest. Still, the pain is

enough to ground him, to postpone the buckling of his knees. At least until salvation is at arm's reach.

He punches the landline, drawing it all the way to the end as if he were painting a circle of blood; oh, that old thing fixed and hooked and functioning on a whim. Nobody had his number anyways, nobody ever had called. Grateful was too small a descriptor to the accompanying relief of hearing the subsequent stops click around each turn of the disc. Who knew his trinkets would be the one thing to keep him safe from harm, well, *more* harm. It could only go worse from here. A thought passes as he waits for the stops to click back to the start: If he'd been able to bend and pick his mobile, would it have even recognized his finger on the screen? Those need the one thing he is lacking so viciously right now, *heat*.

He manages to lodge the tube between his peeling cheek and the shoulder of his coat, a suffering sigh filling every inch of the house as the phone rings.

Deft hands untie the immaculate white apron from his back, worn more out of ritual than out of need. A self-satisfied smile spread along his sealed lip, staring down at the dish. The perfectly cooked pink of the salmon, laying on a bed of golden-crustured rice. The aroma of the fresh basil, and the dates decorating the sides around their own thick rich sauce follow like a trail from the kitchen to the table.

Mahler reverberates in the background, as the wine sloshes into the glass, its movement barely discerning from the path of the faint music. Synchronized. In tune.

Unbuttoning his jacket, Hannibal sits, ready to give his full attention to what could arguably be the most important slice of his day. The ringing piercing through the serene nature of the ending of the 4th movement, glass splintering, metal contracting violently. With an exasperated eye, he walks back to the seating area of the kitchen, and unplugs the offending phone.

Unknown number, and rather late too, he is tempted to let it ring out of the disturbance of the symphony, out of the discourtesy. And, surely, if it's important, they will call again. It's insistent, and he argues that it would be best to get it over with. If it's some acquaintance's

new number, he'll excuse himself promptly. It would be a travesty for the Qaliyeh-e Khorma to go cold.

A wet of the lips, and a swipe of the hand. Instead of a machine, or a recognizable cheery voice, he's met with a rough growl that seizes his soul with both hands.

"Hannibal?"

It's sobering, even if there was no other state of mind present other than lucidness. Will had always found a way to surprise him, but before he could finish a single word of greeting- "The cold won't go away, I-I don't know what to do."

Hannibal's insides froze, the grip on his phone tightening. Purposeful strides allowed him to pick his plate from the table just to shove it inside the fridge without preamble nor elegance, and only with enough caution so that it would not spill and ruin everything else stored inside. Lightning quick work.

"Will, where are you calling from?"

"Wolftrap. Home." His breath caught, words like rusty nails crumbling under the clatter of teeth; that heavy tongue just another miserable obstacle, "Can't feel anything, Ha - nnibal, can't re - member much either. I... don't know what to do."

There's rustling on the other side of the line, and Will is afraid the other man is upset. What time is it, anyways? Did he wake him up? Was he going to help him at all? Previous experience yelled *yes*, but his confused mind was melting all possible kindnesses through his ear and out of his reason. The beat between answers had been enough for him to stifle a whimper as best as he could. "Just stay on the phone while I get to my car, Will, could you do that for me?"

"Yes." Is what he meant to say, but the word slid in a slurring fashion under the patina of his mouth. Could he have swallowed some of the snow? The sound of a car door slamming shut redirected his attention. For a second he believed it had come from outside the open door, beyond the porch. Fuck, he should have closed the door. Between his aching calves, and the

telephone cord, movement was sorely restricted. The wind caresses the back of his neck, and it's more contact than he's had in years.

"Good," Hannibal lowered his phone to the dashboard and put it on speakers, engine purring, "Tell me what you remember."

The clinical tone brought him some calm. Some. "Snow. Woke up between the trees, ha-half buried in the snow."

"How long have you been inside your home, Will?"

"Minutes." He's not convinced, but it couldn't have been long, yet he amends at the encouraging hum on the other side, "Less than an hour..."

"And yet you are still shivering." A sigh, Hannibal does it for show, although there is something too akin to worry tugging at the entrance of his stomach. "Will, I believe you are experiencing symptoms of hypothermia. It is vital that you let me guide you through some steps before I arrive, you might depend on it if it's as serious as I fear it is."

"O-okay."

"Have you taken out your soaked clothes?"

A gulp, everything inside himself is dry, so dry he feels breath stick but not enough to cough. He's sure if he started coughing he wouldn't stop. "I can't, it hurts-"

"Will," It's a soft hush, and not the first time the man had made his name be shaped as the stand-in of every single other word out there. If there wasn't a thick smoke clogging his already fuzzy mind, he'd be touched. "Are any of your heaters on at the moment?"

"Just the fireplace."

"That will do. Stay at a reasonable distance from it, don't try to warm your extremities first or-"

"Can't."

The beat expands into silence, only with short breaths through gritted teeth punctuating the seconds. The highway rolls smoothly, abandoned this far out of the city. Nighttime wrapping the landscape in its otherworldly shine, blue-black, clouds a drying gouache painting. The air smells different once he leaves behind the stateline, getting closer and closer to his destination. He speeds up, knowing his control has cracked, and a single bead is fattening. It's only a matter of time before it falls, and the pressure gives in to welcome the deluge.

Hannibal takes hold of himself, sparing a glance at the dashboard, the ongoing call. It is all getting too close to comfort. Tentatively, he utters "Will?"

"The cord..." Voice cracking. "Can't be on the line and by the fire at the same time."

The trees are shifting on the side of the road, rushing around him like hands pointing towards the end of the world, a voiceless wind beckoning him. "I'll be there in just a few minutes, Will, but I must insist you stand near a source of warmth."

Will laughs. It sounds like a sob. Eyes closed, warm, his tears are warm, burning through his half numb face all the way to the corner of his chapped lips. *Hannibal's on his way*, he tries to reassure himself, but the walls are going to be bleeding once he opens back his eyes, and his shoulders are sagging under the wet clothes, the instinct to just let go growing bolder under his skin. Let the phone clatter off the nook of his body, let his knees draw together and succumb to gravity. Maybe if he hits his head on the way down he can let it all go, finally. All he has to do is think of the stream, thawed out, fish passing around his feet, the sun in his face, and fall. Home in the river, home filling his lungs, peace and quiet, home-

Insistent licks on his palm force him out of the depths of the river, big gulping breaths. Moonlight pouring over the shadows of the house, shining, wet walls crimson red. The big dogs are nuzzling where they reach, his hips, his palms. Hannibal's on his way, he has to be. He couldn't be hallucinating the call, could he? Then again, his brain has supplied him with

more than one conversation that never happened, and not just lately. Will realizes he doesn't care, he just needs someone right now, real or otherwise.

"Don't let me go." Will mumbles, but the line is already dead.

"Never."

From the road, he can make out the silhouette standing stock still inside. Hannibal opens his trunk to gather his first aid bag and jogs up the steps. He winces internally when the sounds do not stir the man, but as he steps closer, he can hear it. Will's talking. The signal cut off their call short around 5 minutes ago and yet he's going on. *What is he hearing as an answer? How often did they talk without him there?*

The dogs welcome him in the way his owner doesn't, gently pawing at his pants. They know. "Will, can you hear me?"

His face scrunches, eyes refusing to look in his direction, focused on the wall instead. The soft light of the moon leaves pearl tracks on his reddened cheeks. "You're not real." A whisper that seems mostly to himself, even with the approaching man, or the telltale sound of the door closing behind him.

"I am as real as you are." Speaking slowly, breath ghosting his curls as he deposits the phone back on its cradle. A hand comes up to his forehead, soft and uncalled for but a brand on his skin nonetheless. "And we have to get you out of those wet clothes."

"Hannibal..." A sigh, involuntary, and the field of vision would blur if he had any tears left. Instead they sting. It was real, it was real, it was *real*-

"Do you think you can remove your jacket? I'm afraid I might have to cut it otherwise." Will lets go of the table, as the other man, the *real* version of him, stands behind him, "Here, let

me.”

Hannibal takes it off him, both gentle and quick, a band-aid ripped. The pain jostled him, and before he could brace himself for impact, an arm wrapped around his middle, holding him there. His hand doesn't burn as much as it splays open and moves to his core, from hip to over his stomach, and up to his chest. Will's caught wanting to lean forwards into the soothing hand, and backwards into what has to be the rest of the other man's body. A shiver is about to wreck him again, at the movement, breathing harshly. But before he can choose, the warmth is removed entirely.

The man cleared the short path to the bed, pushing aside the dog toys and beds that the dogs themselves had dragged there.

Once again, an arm around his middle, another moving his numb limb behind his neck, encouraging Will to lean his weight on him. “You need to lie down, and then we'll remove what's left.” Hannibal was giving him a step by step guide to calm him, of that much he was aware, but his eyelids fluttered with exhaustion and panic at the loud heartbeat pounding at his ears. The nook of his elbow was as on fire as if it had been chucked into a pyre, lodged for a few moments as he was helped to slowly move to the bed.

Will starts crying when Hannibal gently lowers him into the mattress, placing two warm compresses from his bag on his chest. There's a second of relief as he realizes his hands and feet are no longer a ghost to him, before something slides up his thawing legs. He manages to twist his neck enough, keeping his arms on top of the covers as instructed, to see the other man cutting away his pants. Fabric gives way, slides easily, no resistance from the wet cotton, no protest. Hannibal's eyes and demeanor don't match, his eyes are brimstone, his body is clinical and detached. Will wonders if the inferno behind that skull would thaw the other coldness that has nestled in his bones, like a parasite.

He confidently picks the ruined halves of his pants, still taking the time to fold the tatters with ease, before putting them over the chair where the coat went. Will has half a mind to feel grateful, once more, that his boxers and the henley underneath his outerwear were spared and dry. While the sensation returns to his toes, he drags his reborn hands to his face, dragging, grounding him, the scruff of his beard, the callouses wiping away the stains. Hyper-aware of the soft steps around his home, of the clatter of drawers, the low whistle of that one stove top he doesn't use anymore, he closes his eyes. A shaky exhale, some foreign god of winter exiting his body through the space between his palms, and the hazy feeling of slumber begins to stretch its tendrils again.

“Stay awake.” Rumbles through the hallway leading to the kitchen, and a familiar slime drips from the sentence. **Guilt.** Why would he feel guilty? He’d done much more than anyone else would have, hell, if he hadn’t arrived-

A different kind of shiver lights up his skin in goosebumps, and he swallows, he swallows, he swallows. He swallows as if he held the entire mass of himself on his tongue and it must go down lest the coating dissolve. Perhaps he has, since there’s an inexplicable weight inside his bowels, something he does not wish to acknowledge, like the stag out of the corner of his vision, or the knife-edged words Abigail had hurled at him last time. But he’s doing his best, at least he knows that is a universal truth in his life, I’m-

“Doing my best.” A cringe, he can’t withstand the roughness of his own voice, scraping the backside of his eye-sockets.

Paradoxically, he feels more exposed once Hannibal swaddles him with two of his thickest blankets than when half-naked; the waft of long-stored in a dresser, and just a hint of wood, tickling his nose. But before he could get self-conscious (a sign that his brain had unclogged itself from the smoke) he was being helped into a sitting position against the wall —out of lack of a headboard—, and a mug of tea thrust between his hands.

Sparing taking a sip, he looks at Hannibal, *thoroughly*. Past and into him, sliding through the walls put up as if they were paper membrane and he was a blade. The other man locks into his blues the same way, and he wonders if there isn’t a funhouse mirror where Hannibal should be, reflecting back something askew but still him in the end. He can still see the ugly amorphous head of guilt rearing behind a smaller, sturdier wall. But there’s another beast hiding behind, one with the same wingspan as hope. Maybe that’s all he needs to see - for tonight.

They break gazes, and Hannibal sits next to him, at the edge of the bed.

Will lifts the beverage to his mouth, and the sweetness overpowers his senses. It’s whiskey coloured against the yellow ceramic of the inside, and he can’t think of a better surrender. “Thank you.”

“I should be the one thanking you for calling, Will.” Palm on his jaw, thumb rubbing the apple of his cheek, it’s too close to adoration, and Will wishes he could retreat. Instead, he leans into it, like he always has. Sighing at the hushed, soft, murmuring volume that should only be reserved to lovers, and deathbeds. “I’d rather not think of the alternative turn of events for this evening.”

Will takes a second to stretch, leaving the mug on the bedside table, clenching his jaw. “I would have called an ambulance.”

“Would you?” The bluff was called but no accusation, no annoyance, as if it had been expected. “Will, you do not have to placate me. My concern may not be unfounded, but it’s not a burden either. It is a precious thing—a privilege—to have that which we could lose.”

The words hang suspended in the air, as if time itself had retreated from that corner of Virginia. Will struggles not to fall asleep while Hannibal keeps caressing him, fingers now sliding to his scalp, soft nails and curls springing back in place as he cards through. He leans forwards, nosing the warm man’s cheek, his jaw, his neck, until he is resting on his shoulder and being held tight in a hug. Wax meeting the sun, moth kissing a flame. If he had not found himself scorched already, Hannibal knows he would have let Will be that which reduces him to ashes. A part of him knows he still has the potential to do so.

Will is suddenly aware that nothing in the last months, years, had felt as good, and not even the sound that escaped out of him like a mangled, wounded animal finally finding refuge from the rain dampened it. The large hand cupping the back of his head, the subtle scent of cologne, the softness of the ridiculous plaid fabric, it’s so much more than he’d ever thought he would have. Be allowed to have. *Do you have it?*

“How am I supposed to stay awake like this?” It’s half teasing, but he knows he might pass out at any moment. His body has been through enough today, whether he remembers or not.

To his dismay, Hannibal pulls back and hands him his tea. “Finish this, and I’ll leave you to rest.”

“It’s not safe to drive this late.” He spits out without a second thought, causing the other man to stop in his tracks, just a few steps from the bed. Fidgeting with the mug handle and waiting

for the right words, he takes a moment to wiggle his toes under the blankets. It's not pleasant, but at least it doesn't hurt anymore.

"Would you like me to stay?" Hannibal turns to meet his eye, the product in his hair long gone, and his posture slack. He's watching what few have, and he will treasure it.

A smile, rare and well-earned. "I'd feel better if you did."

After lending Hannibal an old, stretched flannel and some sweatpants, and himself changing into his winter sleeping attire, Will's head hit the pillow. The dogs had long since retired to huddle together in their beds, and the fire was put out; nothing else was to be done for the night, except rest. The fact eluded him as soon as the other man emerged from the bathroom, impeccable suit folded in his hand, orange and brown plaid stretched taught and barely long enough at the sleeves.

Casting the alluring image aside, he looked *uncomfortable*.

"On top of the dresser, the dog hair won't get to it."

A nod, and his back on display as he walked to deposit his clothes. He'd never realized his chest and arms were... bigger than him. And he wasn't out of shape, either. The bulk of his back muscles pulled again at the faded pattern, and he lifted his heavy head from the pillow. "I don't mind."

The other man searched his face for something, before starting to unpeel it from his figure, much to the relief of the buttons holding it together themselves.

Trying not to stare, Will looked around the faint shapes and edges of his furniture; a blanket laid on the couch nearest to the bed, forcing him to chuckle and shake his head. He'd fallen asleep in that soft trap too many times while drunk, and the morning after left you needing to

seek a chiropractor. If not to beg for a new spine. "You're not sleeping on the couch, Hannibal. Trust me, you don't want to."

Before he could doubt himself, he rolled to the other side, and pushed the blankets, making space. Gladly, Hannibal accepted the offer. As much as they'd wanted to pretend the distance of the bed was enough, that the warmth of the other was enough with the cold gulf in between, the reality was that you can only hold two magnets so close for so long before they slip from your fingers to clash in the middle. In mere minutes, Hannibal was wrapped against Will, sharing the overlapping space, legs bunched and tangled. A knot of rope you're not sure can be untangled.

Neither tried to sleep. Silver threads of lights unfurled against their faces, the audience waiting patiently for the final act of the play. Will could only hope it would wait until the morning. Chest to back, Hannibal's nose on his pulse, like a bloodhound. The grip tightened slightly, and he felt him visibly swallow behind him, lifting the curtains once more. "I'm afraid you might be sick, Will."

The weight on his entrails launched itself back to the front of his mind, as palpable as the solid warmth pressed against his back. "Is this..." he bit back his wavering voice, the shattered tears who wished to garland the pillow, "Is this your professional opinion?"

"You should have woken up before the snow reached your armpits, Will. If you'd been sleepwalking due to stress, the sting of the cold would have woken you up. A dissociative episode of these proportions is a symptom of something else."

It was easier to admit if he wasn't looking. Not that those amber eyes weren't melting his skull all the way to meet the back of his blues. "I woke up on the edge of my roof last week."

"Will-"

"I hallucinate, lose time, I don't sleep - and when I do I sleepwalk," Staring absentmindedly now at the little crop of the white horizon from his windows, "and I very nearly killed myself tonight. Wh- What if I have a tumor?"

"We can arrange an appointment with a neurologist in the morning, by the end of the week you'll have a diagnosis. I'll call upon favours if I must."

Before he could answer, a kiss laid between his clothed shoulders, and a promise. "I won't abandon you."

The entire night was caught between wakings, indifferent to his suspended exhaustion. Wallpaper no longer visible, just the muscle wall twitching slick, and the paralysis that grips these half-dreams. A constant dripping noise, hanging on to it like a lifeline, his return ticket to reality. Unable to turn around, to even lift a single arm, to shift anything but his sore neck. Layers upon layers of thin silk blanketing him, comfortable and immobilized, and desperate. The certainty that he was going to be devoured whole, the wave that had been cresting, casting shade from the sun on him; he should have seen it coming. He's trapped in the stomach of the problem.

He had known already, hadn't he?

There, on the corner of the room, with his loud-patterned suit, stood the man with the shadow of a spider. His footsteps made no sound, for the dark shape on the wall scuttled its many legs, reaching for his bed. Crawling onto it, all at a snail's pace, time isn't an issue when your prey doesn't have the possibility of escape. The mattress dipping, digging, on each hand and knee around him, until he could look up to his face, a skull in the dead of night. The projection of its nature on the ceiling changed, or tried to, for the long legs of the shadow spider sprouted out of the crown of his head like antlers.

He raised a hand to his face, running along his lips, his temples, pushing aside the rebel curls plastered to his forehead. Possessive. Reverent. A thousand smaller hands were reaching for him, grabbing and pulling, when the familiar beast dipped to kiss. Will parted, welcoming. Freezing, smooth like charcoal. Dry. Until it bit his tongue off from the root, and all the moisture it needed was his own blood.

He must have startled Hannibal awake because he was being rolled onto his back, the dream abruptly fading like fog.

"Sorry," he tried, but no sound passed through.

The mattress lightened, and feet on hardwood pattered back and forth. He could barely keep his eyes open even in the painful shock. Metallic tang, and a bump on the side of his tongue.

A glass of water at hand, and a bottle of pills on the bedside. Smooth, cool, dry hands. Was he ever going to stop coming back to the relief of those surgeon hands?

"Will, you have a fever." The glass of water plucked gingerly out of his slippery grip, "And you were talking in your sleep."

"Nightmare." Will pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbing along his forehead, trying to will his body to settle. Stopped shivering just to start again. "Did you hear what I was saying?"

A smile flitted like a single frame snuck inside the wrong movie across the sleep-drenched expression, "*Come into my parlour-*"

"-said the Spider to the Fly."

"A nursery rhyme?"

"Something like that."

They sat together on the bed for a moment, Hannibal drawing circles on his back, tucking him to fold against his chest until his heartbeat settled, indistinguishable from the one on his ear. Realization climbs onto his spine, digging its talons, *a beast with the wingspan of hope, shedding the velvet of antlers, and the colour of tar-like guilt.*

At the reluctant release, Will was reaching for the pills left on the table, his very own temptation incarnate. He wondered if Hannibal could tell how much he'd been relying on them given the half-empty rattle it made. He must have, for he called for his attention before he was able to grasp it.

"It's nearly dawn, and I'd advise against having ibuprofen on an empty stomach." Lingering whispers like a physical touch on his skin, "A bath will make you feel much better, and in the meantime, I'll prepare breakfast."

Hannibal watches Will shake and nod, standing on feeble, haunted legs, before closing the bathroom door. Once he hears the shower on, its hard pressure hitting the tiling, he scents the air. Sweat, arousal, his own cologne having rubbed on their skin, and sickness. The fevered sweetness that used to draw him in, a parade of wildflower buds beckoning him to wait and observe which dries first, which rots, which flourishes, now has become the simple rot of encephalitis. It surprises him that it took him a week to confess the roof incident, and although he absorbs the impact of novelty from surprise with delight, it concerns him just as much. He can't allow Will to die such a pedestrian death, falling off his roof, neck bent, bleeding out on the porch, half-conscious, or stuck in the snowfield outside his house, or out of shock from trying to force the cold blood of his limbs back to his heart, or walk into the road as he had done before and not be woken by the lights of an oncoming car.

He can't allow him to die.

Behind the most unexpected of doors in his palace, Will is found reading a book by the chaise lounge, sitting at his desk, admiring the view out of the windows. Sometimes, with blood on his glasses, his face, his knuckles, trembling from the adrenaline rush. Or smiling sadly from the other side of a crime scene, unraveling him, seeing him, digging his hands into his cracked ribs with an understanding of what's underneath.

But that will be - can be - should be - later. Now, he has to keep him well fed and sharp, and healthy. He has to keep his trust, without it the small glimpses of a future, any future, might splinter. A teacup on the edge of the counter. Even if it eventually falls, he'll put it back together. Entropy does not rule the realm of imagination.

The egg cracks, yolk sizzling in the pan, along with the tomato paste.

In the shower, Will presses the heels of his palms into his eyes, ruby red and mottled yellow blooming behind his eyelids, the water both too hot and too cold, and lets it wash over. *There's something wrong there's something wrong there's something wrong there's something wrong with Hannibal Lecter-*

End Notes

1. The salmon recipe Hannibal does is [this one](#), from [here](#).
2. I looked up how to treat the symptoms of hypothermia online but still, I hope I didn't kill Will!
3. [The Spider and The Fly by Mary Howitt](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!